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A Vital Environment

By

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THESIS

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Date

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A Vital Environment

By

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Abstract

Every day, nature is being used and is also being destroyed through over cutting and overgrazing of forests and grasslands because of the expansion of human numbers. The economic and material demands of growing villages and towns are not the causes but the results of human activity. What is the impact of the careless occupancy of so many of earth's human occupants? Are we turning everything in nature into something human-made and human used?

My artworks emphasize how nature as a lay concept is changed by humans' desire for comfort and materialism. In addition, since human creation is another form of nature, it proposes a new relationship between humans and nature.

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Introduction

Since the industrial revolution, our environment has changed dramatically. Buildings, factories, and expressways have replaced trees, grass, flowers and streams and natural goods have given way to synthetic products. The inspiration for my exposition came from a commonly used man-made material: concrete. Since the 19th century *concrete*¹ has been used more than any other structural material in the world and the concrete building has become a symbol for modern convenient space. Although concrete brought us rapid economic growth and facility, it also produced many harmful after effects causing both health and environmental concerns. Today, the global effort is addressed by organizations such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF); yet, we still need to see action before we can believe it. I consider that my work has its place in the conduct of the environmental movement because it suggests ways for ecological conservation in metropolitan areas.

¹ Bjorn Lomborg, "Measuring the real state of the world" The skeptical Environmentalist, (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2001), p.138

I chose concrete, a man-made creation that has its own nature, to be the main medium of my work. This construction material, primarily used to make architectural structures and the foundation for roads amongst many other modern day structures, has taken over the space that was formerly occupied by wild plants and animals. I want to analyze that environmental situation by reflecting on our current circumstance based on understanding the visible changes in nature that we have come to accept today.

The first set of photographic series (Figure 1.1) indicates how creatures cannot live harmoniously on or under concrete; it symbolizes a victim of a road kill. To create these images, I placed red meat in each box and poured concrete mix over it to produce the following six abstract images.

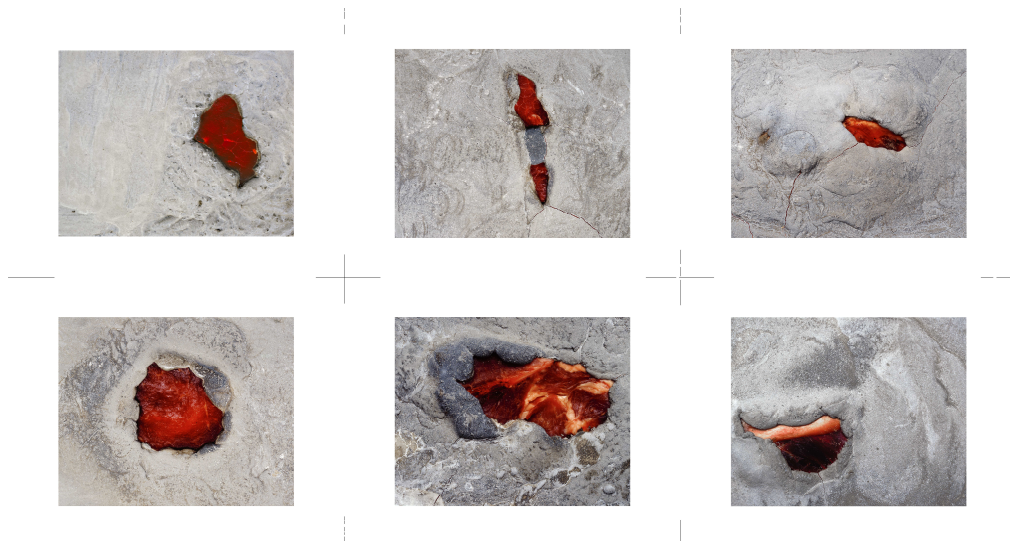


Figure 1.1 Destruction as Second Nature 2007

I chose meat to represent an organic object that is already dead and concrete as physical evidence of what we are doing to the Earth. The visual juxtaposition of meat and concrete expresses an abstract representation of nature versus artifact. From this combination, the viewer is reminded of the destroyed ecosystem, the cause and effect of the interaction between two objects, and the dualism in our belief that contradicts the idea that one's own survival and comfort are above all, as well as thoughts of preserving Earth.

On the sculptural relief works, there are concrete figures slumbering on each canvas. The poses indicate rest, comfort, and partial or total unconsciousness within their own personal boxed space. I made these bas-relief works (or low relief works) to show that we spend most of our time on concrete rather than on soil because we may subconsciously feel safer in our own creation. The symbolic meaning of a living body is more strongly expressed through 3-dimensional relief rather than 2-dimensional photographic surfaces alone. I prepared three 48x72 and two 48x60inch rectangular canvases (Figure 1.2). These rectangular frames are the general dimensions of standard beds and are large enough for ordinary people and children to sleep in.



Figure 1. 2 Human Figures on Canvases, Gallery installation view, 2008

To shape the human figures, I attached plaster bands on actual human bodies. By using the casting shapes, the plastered bodies were taken out and replaced on canvases to create the sleeping poses. The figures convey different generations and sexes to show how the issue of living within our own creation does not affect any one specific age or gender.

Through all my concrete works, I want to show a true reflection of how human beings perceive the natural environment. As an artist, it is my desire to provide the motivation to look back and question our relationship to the environment and nature itself.

The Process

My work aimed at expressing, in a visual sense, how humans desire to possess nature. This idea began while driving on the road one night. I passed a deer lying dead on the shoulder. Since then I have come face to face with other dead animals, which clearly furthered my realization that they did not die for lack of food consumption or the attack of other animals, but by automobile accidents. I came to a conscious understanding that is often forgotten and neglected: the importance of protecting all living organisms in our ecosystem.

According to the *Animal People Newspaper*², the following chart reveals the number of animals that are killed annually by motor vehicles in the United States.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.2 million dogs • 15 million raccoons • 19 million opossums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5.4 million cats • 22 million rats • 350,000 deer
--	---

Human beings constitute only a portion of nature. As such, we are not free from the effect nature has on us. With these experiences, I gravitated towards

² Edutel Technology, “Road Kill,” 14 February, 2008, 4 March 2009

<[Http: //roadkill.edutel.com/rkdataarchive.html](http://roadkill.edutel.com/rkdataarchive.html).>

channeling these thoughts into my own work.

To create this hypothesis, I thought back on the road kill. Concrete is the most common structural material to encroach on the territory of others in nature, such as fauna and flora. I used the images of the road kill I saw everyday as the basis for my work.



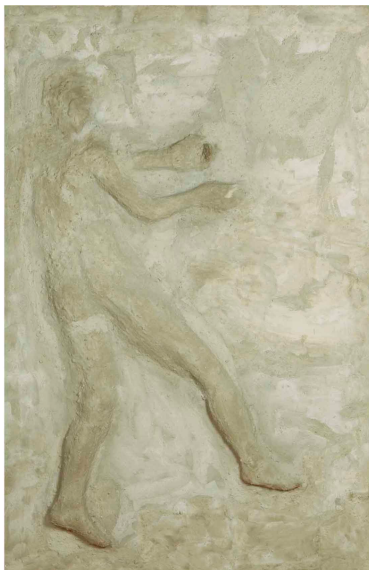
Figure 1.3 Road kill image and Destruction as Second Nature 2007

The first set of photographic work is an abstract interpretation of destruction and deterioration of the environment. I portrayed the actual image next to a unique visual image (Figure 1.3), not only as a statement of my concept, but also as an aesthetic art form. As Mel Gooding writes in *Abstract Art*, “A great deal of abstract art, as we have seen, seems to return or contain reference, of one sort or another, to the external world. These might be found in disguised or distorted form, in hints and suggestion of figures, or in passages opened to visual interpretation.”³ With this statement, I want to

³ Mel Gooding, *Abstract Art*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2001) p. 75

point out that the combined materials are a metaphor of the results of human transportation on concrete highways. The first photographic series signifies nature around us, and represents anthropocentrism, that is, humans as preeminent. As a result, my abstract photographs explore the possibility of destruction, suggesting a more metaphoric approach rather than simply reflecting on what we see, which is incessantly changing and expanding.

By using man-made material – concrete – my work imitates the human process of using concrete to create something. As shown in Figure



***Figure 1. 4 Human figure
on Canvas 2008***

1.4, it is, ironically, a depiction of a human. My sculptural pieces were made from plaster to create human figures with the canvas symbolizing a confined block of concrete in today's visual society. Though I physically brushed the canvas with concrete, the actual texture formation is a natural phenomenon. This can be seen as a false reality between humans

and nature. In this study, these relief works express a contemporary explanation of nature in modern society by recognizing how meaning can be

an explanation of nature in modern society. By recognizing how meaning can be read through materiality, we may come to a new understanding and acceptance of this social phenomena occurring in our surroundings.

The other purpose of making sculptured relief was to extend beyond the medium of photography itself. To pursue sculptural work is to deviate from the comprehension of customary and universal meaning and reject the central idea by challenging the obvious.

All things existing in daily life have been developed into materials for use and expression, in addition to the conventional materials used over the past few centuries. This contributes to the experimentation of art, allowing fundamental materials to be used for art without confinement. Historically, this experimental spirit has provided the purpose of art. For instance, a collage based on the cubist paintings of the early 20th century was the beginning of attention to objects. Such attention was widely influential throughout the century. Dadaist *Marcel Duchamp*⁴ in particular conceptualized objects as ready-made. Such conceptions were developed into the pop art of the 1960s. This genre allowed freedom from typical rectangular

⁴ Patrick Frank, Art forms, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002) p. 423

frameworks, from two-dimensional planes to three-dimensional solids, that is, small spaces to large environments. Much like the experimental spirits, I want to analyze the environmental situation of nature made artificial in this current age and express the meanings of nature in modern society through abstract photographs and sculptural relief works.

My concrete images can be visual objects by themselves without the actual material presentation. Concrete images become a more realistic model than the real world itself. Therefore, my abstract photographs and sculptural relief works show that individuals also exist in the simulated and imaginary world. By newly recognizing natural meanings and reviewing our real environment based on surrounding nature, one makes nature an object in art. It is the intuitive power of nature, the spirit in which it is observed rather than how it is reproduced. The way in which man, nature and art coexist and can communicate with one another can be facilitated by expressing internal images through the essence of vitality hidden on the inside. It is not merely the superficial reality of nature, but a thorough reflection on human existence.

Anthropocentrism

Francis Bacon said that the human makes nature the object of his activities; human life is part of nature existing in nature and the human problems dealt with by art could not but be affected by environment⁵. Therefore, creative activities with nature as the object of concrete will express the visual measures of an age. Such expression about nature is the inevitable approach towards the source and the essence of life, and is regarded as the act by which a human as a living body has his existence confirmed. Art and nature have an indivisible relationship, and nature has been repeatedly expressed as the fundamental object of art from the dawn of time.

Many artists' creative presentations target nature. In the case of Goldsworthy, his working methods and styles are as diverse as the natural phenomenon that he incorporated in his art works. His purpose in creating artwork is to accomplish a dialogue between art and nature, and to express the coexistence and union between the two.

⁵ Solomon, Julie robin and Martin, catherine gimelli. "eassys to commemorate the advancement of learning(1605-2005)"Francis bacon and the refiguring of early modern thought, (Vermont: Ashgate publishing company, 2005)

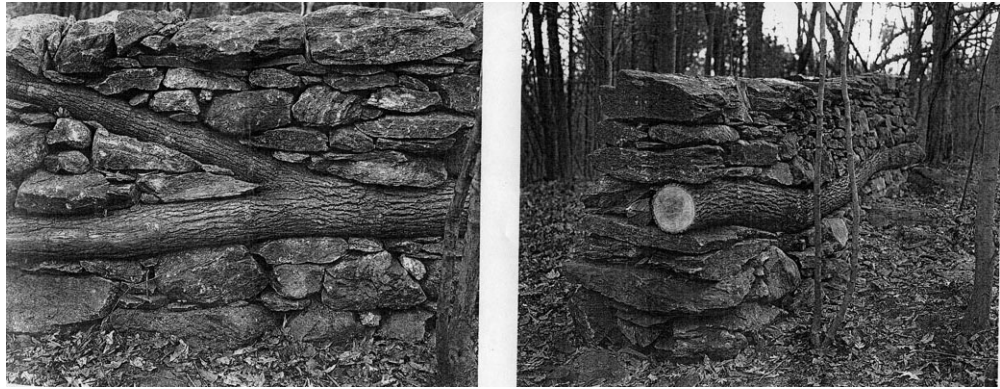


Figure 1.5 Woods by Andy Goldsworthy

In his woods series (Figures 1.5), I understand that he regards nature as the harmony and the equilibrium within mutual interaction, emphasizing that humans should adjust themselves to nature, specifically, as one part of nature as a whole, demonstrating the concept of an ecological worldview.

He considers the processes, namely, individual experiences and behaviors, more important elements to the art work than finished works that become a replica of an idea. His works are not obtainable as objects, but are created in a natural environment to become one with nature. Human beings and nature coexist in society, although not always in harmony as Andy Goldsworthy's art claims.



Figure 1.6 Destruction as Second Nature 2007

Figure 1.6, one of my abstract photographic images of concrete and meat, represents the desire for human beings to dominate and possess nature. This perhaps originated from the beginning of the existence of mankind.

From early in our history until the present, as science and technology advance, nature has been conquered and exploited more and more. After the development of civilization, symbiosis and coexistence became a doubtful goal. The most important environmental concept to change is to stop believing that humans are more important than anything else. The current environmental crisis can be looked upon as being caused by an anthropocentric value system. Often we consider human being as the most significant entities of the universe. We should, however, be wary of anthropocentrism and not assume that human existence is more superior to any other.

We can overcome anthropocentrism that exploits the environment and the common human belief that we have superiority over nature by recognizing the interdependence of nature and culture. Human intervention premised on those values can be the guiding ethical principle for future generations. Anthropocentrism interprets reality exclusively in terms of human values and experiences. Anthropocentrism, however, is unable to provide a theory of how to preserve nature; therefore, the balance of the entire ecosystem could be at risk. If nature is believed to be a big network for linking existence, then the pursuit of individualism cannot be adequate for its preservation.

Humans and Nature

"We feel sorry for the disappearance of the characteristics of our native town the most. The biggest shock of all is that we have destructed the place of our free will where we have lived and also have to live for the period to come ...we own this as the inevitable as far as human beings are not separated from nature... however, the biggest hope of yours lies in the improvement in such environmental problems."⁶ *Robert Adams*

We can see that nature is surrounded by an artificially constructed space overflowing with industrial products. We are living in a myriad of artificial structures produced by ourselves. City planning which corresponds to population increases is intensifying the growing demand for artificial structures. It could be argued that landscapes overflowing with artificial structures have become a new version of the natural, and that such an attitude towards artificial structures is one of many perspectives in observing today's landscapes.

According to Robert Adams' statement, we can formulate a general idea. Our surroundings have become a place where plants can no longer grow

⁶ Robert Adams, To make it Home, (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1989), p. 164.

naturally and tree-lined streets, grassplots, park reservoirs, skyscrapers and large-density apartments fill in the city.

People may not consider nature as a landscape until they gradually become alienated from nature. We have brought exotic plants into our homes and removed underwater creatures from the ocean into contained spaces to satisfy our needs and pleasure. Nature is easily obtained through pet stores and is gradually replaced by imitations made of synthetic materials. Nature, through our control-complex, is made more convenient to possess and manage within our man-made boundaries, particularly metropolitan areas; however, we should not forget that we exist, on a larger scale, within nature's boundaries.

I created portraits that were manipulated in Photoshop to extend the second step of the meat series by having actual human faces overlaid on concrete blocks. In the visual images (Figure 1.7), I interpret that we find it difficult to get out of the artificial structures, which have become the new landscape today. It represents us, metaphorically, as we sink silently into the concrete.



Figure 1.7 Portraits on Concretes 2008

These portraits are overlapping on a background of three different types of concrete, which are compounds of the same material. This shows our physical limitation as human beings through the uniformity of figures despite being born into various environments.

It also considers that the human being is part of nature and intends to find his identity and live in accordance with the fundamental laws of nature. Hence, they place the emphasis not on the representation of the object but on the expression of the spiritual aspect of the figure, which makes the portraits appear calm and subjective.

Humans have the advantage of convenience in life and material affluence. The relationship between humans and nature is destroyed when humans choose convenience over harmony. This has become a serious issue; it is no longer something we need to learn or something that comes to us as a shock. Rather, it has become an issue that may destroy human life. Human

beings cannot survive while continually denying nature's needs. We must coexist with each other. Living in a society with a rapidly changing living environment and a highly developed scientific civilization has made us lose our nature; if we are to continue living on the planet, we must reconnect with the natural environment, which sustains us.

Conclusion

In *Asking for the Earth*, James George writes: “We have a dominant culture that is, in an objective sense, a counter-culture, because it is, in practice (if not in theory), against the order of Nature.” ⁷

While this may seem like an obvious statement, mainstream media vastly distorts it. We might see animals in TV ads, anthropomorphized to behave like us. Wild animals are stretched then shrunk in animated sequences. In John Berger’s essay, *Why look at Animals?*⁸, he says that humans have used animals as food, clothes and transportation but ever since the 19th century, they have used them for other purposes. Now, wild animals have been transformed into characters in animated films such as Disney’s to mimic the human condition today. By being able to have control over animal behavior, human beings show their anthropocentric tendencies.

⁷ George, James, Asking for the Earth: Waking Up to the Spiritual/Ecological Crisis, (Rockport, Mass.: Element, 1995.) p 155.

⁸ Berger, John, “why look at animal?” About Looking, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) p3-28.



Figure 1.8 Geico Insurance Company's Commercial Picture

Such imagery (Figure 1.8) is attractive, but it conditions us to view nature in a manipulated, disembodied, and absolutely detached context. The effects on modern day media have led us to generalize and simplify nature as we do all things.

When I first started my work, I was curious about the circumstances within our environment. Ever since that encounter with the deer, I questioned my everyday lifestyle, such as sleeping, walking, and most of my every day activities, which were in fact part of a larger problem. I wanted to create a body of work that would embody the ideas of nature as artifice. Looking at environmental issues as an occurrence separate from us makes it something we can despise and proclaim must change, but we forget that pollution comes from us and that making pollution is something very (in) human. My

exploration has brought me to ask what we perceive as nature and what we perceive as pollution, and how the line between the two has become very thin. It is almost as if they are merged together, yet separate. My work brings forth the idea of how we must change to coexist with nature.

While I was making my body of work, I realized that art is the combination of time and environment. I gained a greater knowledge through the working process rather than my expectations of the final result.

Based on this research, I hope to expand more deeply on my ideas about art and its materiality along with exploring the role of the artist in the larger cultural context.

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